

Self-Sacrifice Can Equal Self-Destruction:  
Why the US Marine Corps Needs a Meritorious Sabbatical  
Leave Program

Captain James D. Fleming

Conference Group #3

Major Gregory A. Thiele

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Marines loyal to the Marine Corps should not be forced to leave in order to recharge themselves, but that is exactly what happens today. Operating force deployment schedules in support of the Global War on Terror have drastically stressed the United States Marine Corps (USMC). General Conway's decision to increase the force to 202,000 is a positive step toward increasing dwell time between deployments; however, tangible results from increased force levels will not be realized until the end of 2009. The Supporting Establishment special duty assignment tours offer little respite either. If one randomly interviews any Marine with a recruiting tour in his or her past, he or she will discover how stressful that duty can be. Tales of six to seven day workweeks with the Marines working over 12-hour days will be common. Marines are bred from boot camp and officer candidate's school to sacrifice self for the benefit of the whole. Marine culture rewards its members for their ability to endure hardship. Nevertheless, in some cases, self-sacrifice is self-destructive. The United States Marine Corps should establish a meritorious sabbatical leave program for career Marines in order to refresh and retain the best and brightest quality Marines.

## Current Programs

Several Marine Corps and Department of Defense programs exist, which on the surface offer Marines an opportunity to recharge their minds and bodies. After close examination, the drawbacks of these programs become apparent, however. The Marine Corps is organized into four parts: 1) Headquarters Marines Corps - the Commandant and staff agencies responsible for the training and administration of the force; 2) Operating forces - combatant forces projecting force in foreign theaters; 3) Supporting establishment - "personnel, bases, and activities that assist the Operating Forces accomplish their missions"; and 4) Reserves - "units and members of a reserve component who are liable for active duty in time of war or national emergency as proclaimed by the President.<sup>1</sup>

Two programs are available to active duty officers appear to provide a break from the operating forces and the supporting establishment parts of the Marine Corps. However, these programs have an adverse impact on the participant's career. The first program is the International Affairs Officer Program (IAOP). The end-state of this program is to:

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<sup>1</sup> Marine Corps Reference Publication 5-12D

identify, select, and train [a] corps of officers for future assignments to high-level Marine Corps, Joint, or Combined staffs in operations, planning, or intelligence billets; and for duty with the Defense Attaché System. Maintaining this pool of well-trained and experienced international specialists will be increasingly important for operational and strategic success regarding political-military affairs.<sup>2</sup>

The international affairs officer program requires an officer to separate from his or her primary military occupational field for up to six years. Twelve months are spent learning a new language, twenty-four months are spent in Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) earning a Master of Arts in Global Relations. The payback tour for this program is thirty-six months in a foreign station.

The second program available to active duty officers is the Special Education and Advanced Degree Program (SEP). This program's goal is to:

annually select, through a formal selection board process, qualified officers to be educated in skills that will allow them to fill billets requiring graduate education. The education is designed to provide the essential graduate level skills necessary for an officer to satisfactorily function in a Special Education Program billet<sup>3</sup>.

This special education program requires a twelve-month

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<sup>2</sup> Marine Corps Order 1520.11E International Affairs Officer Program

<sup>3</sup> Marine Corps Order 1520.9G Special Education Program

education period followed by a thirty-six month payback tour filling a specialized job outside the Marine's primary occupational field. Marines participating in the SEP are forced to make a serious career decision, however. Marines receiving graduate education funded by the Marine Corps are indebted to become terminal staff officers and are traditionally less competitive for promotion and command selection.

Both of these programs seem like attractive options that offer a break from the stresses of continuous deployments or high demand special duty assignments. Both programs do offer unique opportunities to enrich a select group of officers. However, these benefits come at a high price. For example, leaving one's primary job for up to six consecutive years makes that officer almost useless in his or her primary field. As a result, an officer participating in one of these programs becomes less competitive for promotion. One needs only to review Secretary of the Navy (SECNAV) special guidance addressing the Lieutenant Colonel selection board to realize that IAOP has historically hurt participants' competitiveness for promotion. The SECNAV promotes the validity of the IAOP by writing, "you should consider that the Marine Corps benefits when the officer corps possesses a broad spectrum

of experience such as foreign language proficiency and cultural awareness".<sup>4</sup> Would the SECNAV feel compelled to validate the IAOP member's experience if there was no related career stigma?

Two additional programs exist for staff noncommissioned officers on active duty to realize a break from work related stress, but these programs have their limitations also. The first one is the Staff Noncommissioned Officer (SNCO) Degree Completion Program. "The goal of the staff noncommissioned officer degree completion program is to provide qualified staff noncommissioned officers to fill specific billets requiring baccalaureate degree/4-year level college training and maintain an inventory of staff noncommissioned officers trained in specialized areas to meet requirements within the Marine Corps."<sup>5</sup> This program gives the target population a chance to attend college for up to eighteen months in order to complete a bachelor's degree. Participants must incur an additional forty-eight months of service upon graduation. The possibility also exists for a thirty-six month post-graduation assignment outside of the

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, PRECEPT CONVENING THE FY10 LIEUTENANT COLONEL SELECTION BOARD (From the Secretary of the Navy 28 Aug 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Marine Corps Order 1560.21D SNCO Degree Completion

participant's primary occupational field. The SNCO Degree Completion Program offers up to an eighteen-month break for its participants, but it also removes the Marine from his or her primary job and makes him or her less competitive for promotion.

The second SNCO program is the SNCO Year Out Program (SNCOYOP). In this program, SNCOs from selected occupational fields are chosen to work in industry for twelve months. The goal of this program is to allow staff noncommissioned officers to "work and train with the private sector [and] to gain and exchange experience and knowledge."<sup>6</sup> The SNCOYOP, however, fails to give the SNCO corps stress relief for one main reason. This program is available only to a select population; thus, it does not apply to the entire SNCO population.

The most recent Department of Defense development is an almost perfect vehicle to give enlisted service members and officers a true chance to recharge themselves without negatively impacting their careers. The Career Intermission Pilot Program (CIPP) was established under the House of Representatives Bill 5658-Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal-Year 2009. CIPP

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<sup>6</sup> THE SNCO YEAR OUT PROGRAM (SNCOYOP), Date Signed: 7/30/2001 MARADMIN Number: 350/01

allows active duty service members to pause their time in service and time in grade in order to seek personal or professional goals for up to 36 months. Participants are transferred to the individual ready reserves for the duration of their sabbatical and must report to a local reserve unit one weekend a month. Service members are paid a small stipend for their time. They also must pay back two months of service for every one month of sabbatical leave.<sup>7</sup> The Career Intermission Pilot Program is a useful base model from which the Department of Defense can continue to improve. No retention tool can match the benefits of a successful sabbatical program.

#### **Meritorious Sabbatical Leave Program**

According to Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1, Warfighting, "Marine Corps Doctrine today is based principally on warfare by maneuver." "Maneuver warfare seeks to circumvent a problem and attack it from a position of advantage rather than meet it straight on."<sup>8</sup> Successfully fighting a war of maneuver calls for refreshed and creative leaders. These leaders must be capable of recognizing centers of gravity and potential avenues of

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<sup>7</sup> House of Representatives Bill 5658-Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal-Year 2009

<sup>8</sup> Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, Warfighting.

attack. The Marine Corps also needs creative, forward-thinking leaders able to shape and steer the force to meet tomorrow's global threats. A meritorious sabbatical program would assist in retaining a refreshed and creative force. The Corps can learn a lesson by examining successful academic and business models.

For example, "[academic] sabbaticals are granted to faculty to increase a faculty member's value to the University through enhanced opportunities for professional renewal, planned travel, study, formal education, research, writing or other experience of professional values."<sup>9</sup> Many businesses have taken cues from the academic field and started instituting sabbatical programs of their own. For example, "Apple Computers offers employees a six-week paid sabbatical after every five years of employment" in order to maintain a refreshed workforce.<sup>10</sup> Another successful business sabbatical model is being used at the Frank Russell Company, a pension-fund consulting firm.

[They] initiated a sabbatical program that allows associates with ten or more years of full-time service to take eight weeks of paid time to use for whatever purpose they wish. The Frank Russell Company's chairman believes that 'we need to renew the mind and spirit of our associates...the basis of our company is

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<sup>9</sup> University of South Florida (USF) Faculty Rule 6C4-10.104(17)(a)- December 12, 2008 - Sabbatical Policy

<sup>10</sup> HR Magazine - March 1996: Why Give Employee Sabbaticals? To Reward, Relax, and Recharge.

intellectual capital.'

The Marine Corps is no different in this regard. An increase in rank requires an increase in intellectual acumen and creativity in order to preserve the Corps' most precious resource, its people.

The positive impact that sabbaticals have on the corporate work force cannot be questioned. Both parties, employee and employer, benefit from implementing a sabbatical leave program. "Employees who take advantage of these programs speak enthusiastically about coming back relaxed and rejuvenated. Managers see them as a way to reward and retain employees." Sabbaticals refresh employees and enable them to carry with a mentally refreshed and recharged. For example, "Lisa Angel took a three-month sabbatical from her law firm to bicycle around China and Southeast Asia [and] it enabled her to continue practicing law"<sup>11</sup>. The Marine Corps would realize the same valuable return if it initiated a similar program.

Precedents exist, for example, the Marine Corps uses retention tools to entice first-term and career Marines to continue serving on active duty. First-term enlisted Marines and enlisted Marines who completed a successful

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<sup>11</sup> Christian Science Monitor - September 24, 2007 - Bosses See Benefit in Giving Sabbaticals to Workers

recruiting tour are eligible for duty station preference, if a valid billet exists for them. Another existing retention tool is the selective reenlistment bonus program. This program pays Marines bonus money to remain on active duty. The Marine Corps paid \$439.6 million of bonus money during fiscal year 2008 resulting in 14,200 Marines reenlisting on active duty.<sup>12</sup>

Duty station incentives and bonus money are effective tools for retaining a qualified force, but they do nothing to ensure that the force is recharged. Headquarters Marine Corps must initiate a meritorious sabbatical program focused on retaining a creative and recharged force. The return on this investment of time is well worth the risk. The Marine Corps would be accepting a short-term and possibly permanent loss of personnel. Participants could find other jobs or make themselves unqualified for further service, but the Corps faces these manpower challenges daily. Barry Thomas, The Frank Russell Company's Human Resources Director, recommends that any [organization] considering implementing a sabbatical program should "look at it as a long-term investment, not a short-term cost".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Marine Corps Total Force Structure - Cognos Database, October 2008

<sup>10</sup> HR Magazine - March 1996: Why Give Employee Sabbaticals? To Reward, Relax, and Recharge.

### **Implementation of a Meritorious Sabbatical Program**

Implementing the ideal Meritorious Sabbatical Program would be very simple. The ideal model could emerge from the CIPP by adding only two features. First, participants have the option to take a funded or a non-funded sabbatical lasting up to thirty-six months. This program has two funded options: 1) twenty-five percent of the member's base pay for community service and 2) fifty percent of the member's base pay for any education experience that will be useful to the Marine Corps in future service (i.e., language training abroad or earning a master's degree).

Non-paid sabbaticals will be for personal development not necessarily useful to the Marine Corps (i.e., being a stay-at-home parent or hiking the Appalachian Trail). Second, the service member would not be obligated to return to active or reserve service upon completion of the sabbatical. A service member choosing to separate from the funded sabbatical program would agree to pay back the total amount of the stipend he or she has been paid. Service members returning to active service after completing sabbaticals would, however, be obligated to twenty-four months of contracted service. Members would also have to

show a record of exceptional service to a panel of senior officers and staff non-commissioned officers to be selected. Timing of the sabbatical period would have to be coordinated with the requestor's date of separation from his or her current assignment.

Headquarters Marine Corps could easily manage this sabbatical population much like it does Marines on non-occupation specific special duty assignments. For example, any occupation specialist can serve on recruiting duty because graduating recruiting school earns members the recruiting occupational designator 8411. Headquarters Marine Corps could build fifty enlisted and fifty officer overflow spaces in total force structure model to account for the loss of 100 personnel the first fiscal year that the program begins.

#### **Counterarguments**

Opponents to a Meritorious Sabbatical Program will raise three valid concerns against its implementation. The first argument is the loss of usable personnel for the duration of the sabbatical. This argument is not valid because a precedent already exists. While service members are on special duty assignments, the loss is accommodated. The personnel losses due to sabbaticals can be handled in a similar fashion. The total force population ultimately

would have enough personnel to staff critical positions.

The next argument is loss of occupational proficiency. The same argument can be made for Marines serving on special duty assignments. An infantry unit leader serving on recruiting duty loses occupational proficiency for the duration of the tour; however, he subsequently can attend career level school and be prepared to serve in his primary occupational field again.

The strongest argument against the Meritorious Sabbatical Program is the potential to lose the service member entirely. Here it can be said that the Marine who separates from the Marine Corps while on sabbatical would likely separate from service on or off the program. The author separated from active service for ten months following 3.5 years of commissioned service because he needed to recharge. He needed to recharge due to stress he encountered over two combat tours leading infantry Marines in Iraq. His service prior to his separation was exemplary. The author was mentally rejuvenated after a ten-month hiatus. His experience is proof that a Meritorious Sabbatical program would only strengthen the Marine Corps.

## **Conclusion**

The Marine Corps always strives to retain the best and brightest Marines. Successfully fighting maneuver style warfare calls for the best, brightest, and most energized leaders that the Marine Corps can provide. The current programs used to recharge the Corps' population are inadequate because they adversely affect and/or are inaccessible to the whole force. The Meritorious Sabbatical Program would serve as a retention tool that allows stressed Marines with a history of excellence to take a break, recharge, and return to active service with a renewed love of the Corps. The Corps' most precious resource is its people; therefore, the Corps' leaders must be as mentally charged as possible. Tired leaders will ultimately squander the lives of the Corps' American Sons.

## Appendix A

House of Representatives Bill 5658-Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal-Year 2009 (May 21, 2008)

TITLE V--MILITARY PERSONNEL POLICY  
Subtitle D-General Service Authorities  
Section 532 - Career Intermission Pilot Program

Under the conditions provided in the Career Intermission Pilot Program, active duty service members:

- 1) Are released from active duty for a period not to exceed thirty-six months to meet personal or professional needs.
- 2) Are transferred to the Ready Reserves during this period.
- 3) Shall return to active duty at the end of the agreed-upon period or such an earlier date as the service member may request.
- 4) Shall enter into an agreement with the Secretary of Defense that he or she shall serve on active duty for a period of not less than two months for every month of program participation.
- 5) Shall, during the period of release from active duty, report at least once per month to a location designated by the Secretary of Defense, and are required to maintain the job specialty qualifications held immediately before being released from active duty under the program.
- 6) Shall not be eligible for consideration for promotion while enrolled in the program.
- 7) Upon return to active duty, the service member's date of rank shall be adjusted to a later date and will be eligible for consideration for promotion when officers of the same peer group are eligible for consideration.
- 8) Shall receive two times one-thirtieth of the basic pay for each month of enrollment in the program.
- 9) Shall not receive incentive or bonus pay which he or she would otherwise be entitled.

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